

research snapshot

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Work-oriented Welfare Programs Exclude Single Mothers from the Benefits of Paid Work

What is this research about?

Welfare programs today are created with several assumptions. First, it is assumed that if an individual has paid work, then they do not need financial aid. Second, welfare programs often direct those in poverty towards work as a solution. As a result, many issues within the welfare program- and the economic market that shapes it- are not addressed. Finally, welfare programs have a specific image of what is the “ideal human being”. This “ideal” is shaped by values of the market. As a result, these values direct who can get ahead through paid work, and who is kept behind. This affects single mothers in particular. That is, welfare programs and labour markets function together in ways that close off opportunities for single mothers to participate in rewarding and meaningful paid work. This has serious effects on their ability to break out of poverty.

What did the researcher do?

With a national team of researchers, the researcher looked at various workfare programs in Canada to examine the effects of work-designated welfare programs on single mothers. The researcher also organized a series of four panel interviews with a group of 42 single mothers in the Ontario Works (OW) program. These interviews took place over the course of three years.

What you need to know:

Single mothers are excluded from the benefits of paid work in both the economic market and state welfare programs. This is because both the market and the state have merged into one single social space. As a result, they share the same expectations about who should be entitled to social assistance, and through what types of employment. These norms are influenced by neoliberal ideals and conservative family values. As a result, single mothers experience workfare programs to keep them poor, sustaining their positions as low-wage, low-skilled workers. They also encounter many obstacles to strategic work in the labour market, meaning that they are often forced to be dependent on a male-family figure for survival.

What did the researcher find?

The researcher found that many single mothers in the OW program encountered difficulties in the types of employment to which they were directed. For example, they found themselves in jobs that were no different than the ones they had before going on social assistance. Low wages, irregular hours, and de-valued education and skills continued to be a problem for single mothers.

Single mothers discussed the demands and limits set up by work-oriented social assistance programs like OW. Many continued to find themselves in the position of choosing between their work and their children. Also, “desperate” measures did not

disappear. This included a lack of resources for their children's basic needs, and remaining dependent on abusive relationships for help.

Another issue related by many single mothers was that the work provided to them through the OW program was only minimally rewarding, financially or otherwise. The main purpose of these required activities was to prove their commitment to paid work. Instead, what these women wanted was the opportunity to enhance skills and gain strategic work experience. Many of the women described finding better jobs on their own or through friends rather than through OW. Many also found that the work OW directed them towards was not in their fields of expertise, and that they were pressured to take the first job offered to them. This was an issue particularly for immigrant or foreign women. They described experiences in which their knowledge, skills and qualifications were being de-valued.

Gender also played a role in the experiences of single mothers in the work-oriented welfare programs. Any child support women received from the father of their children was deducted (dollar for dollar) from their welfare cheques. OW would also assume financial interdependence if a single mother was living with a man for three months or more.

Overall, the single mothers interviewed felt that the OW program did not recognize their existing qualifications or expertise. The program also does not value the work involved in being a mother. They experience the system to label them as bad mothers and unworthy human beings because they are on social assistance. Finally, the system works to reinforce that the best way – and some perceive the only way – out of poverty is through dependency on a man.

How can you use this research?

This research would be vital for policy makers working with social assistance programs. It would

allow for one to examine the limits of work-oriented welfare. The research also sheds insight on the differential impact experienced by people in this program, based on gender, race, and culture. Social workers and community agencies would also find this research useful dealing with clients living on welfare.

About the Researcher

Luann Good Gingrich is an Associate Professor at York University's School of Social Work. The research for Good Gingrich's work was part of the *Lone Mothers- Building Social Inclusion* project, which was funded by a CURA grant from the SSHRC.

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